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Angie M. Seifert Anderson

Anoka-Ramsey Community College, angie.anderson@anokaramsey.edu

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BOOK REVIEW

Generation Me

Angie M. Seifert Anderson

Instructor

angie.anderson@anokaramsey.edu

Speech Department

Anoka-Ramsey Community College

Cambridge, MN

Twenge, J. M. (2006). *Generation me: Why today's young Americans are more confident, assertive, entitled-and more miserable than ever before*. New York: Free Press.

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As many instructors search for academic writing to address the increasing problem of academic classroom incivility, many will overlook the book, *Generation Me*, by Jean Twenge. The author, “a widely published associate professor of psychology at San Diego State University” (book cover) feels compelled to specifically address academic incivility through issues of cheating and questioning of authority in only a few areas of the book. However, the analytical teacher will soon recognize how the common tendencies of this generation are directly related to civility issues in the classroom. It is evident in the author’s often sarcastic tone that she is a member of Generation Me (commonly called GenMe). GenMe covers anyone from 18-35 years of age; so many younger instructors may also find themselves in this generation description. The book may be an enjoyable journey of self-discovery or childhood reminiscence, however even more so it gives excellent insight into the operations of this generation.

This author (with the help of graduate/research assistants) gathered “results of twelve studies on generational differences” (mostly between Baby Boomers and GenMe) “based on data from 1.3 million young Americans” (p. 3). One might question why it is important to understand generational differences. Is it not more important to know how a person was raised; his or her background, economic status, geographical location, race or gender and the influence these factors have on the individual’s personality? Several of the studies quoted found “that *when* you were born has more influence on your personality than the family who raised you” (p. 3). This may be true; however, the author should also briefly recognize or address that some do not fall into the generational definitions. One chapter labels previous generations as ‘prude’ regarding sexuality, while GenMe is the ‘crude’ generation. Some may consider this an inequitable generalization.

The book examines several tendencies of GenMe. The first prevalent tendency identified is the overall lack of need for social approval and the decline of social rules. It is more important to “rebel against restrictive social mores” and not “follow the rules” and instead “do whatever makes you happy” (p. 21). The very nature of this attitude screams a lack of concern for others and general order. To follow the rules, is a direct rejection of the individual’s needs and wants, which is against the tendencies of GenMe. Academic civility, at its core, is the exact opposite, needing one to care for the needs of others with a focus on the community. It soon becomes clear why academia has issues with civility more now than ever.

One might wonder when reading some of this, “How is this unique to GenMe? Didn’t the Baby Boomers also rebel against authority, along with social rules and roles?” The book included juxtaposed lists comparing Baby Boomers/GenMe. However, the discernible difference comes in that Baby Boomers seemed to want a change in community along with the self. I believe it is best explained in “a careful study of news published or aired between 1980 and 1999 [which] found a large increase in self-reference word (I, me, mine, and myself) and a marked decrease in collective words (humanity, country, or crowd)” (p. 51).

The author states that this lack of care for others can “explain the decline in manners and politeness” (p. 26). There is a constant desire to question authority. Most instructors have experienced a student who asked for a grade change, cheated on a test, or plagiarized a paper. This all stems from GenMe’s sense of entitlement. “If you acknowledge that you were lazy about studying-or just plain stupid-your self-esteem will suffer. If you can blame the teacher’s unfair test, however, you can slide through the experience still feeling good about yourself.” (p. 147).

Twenge chastises the academic community for the focus on self throughout the 80s and 90s by giving constant messages such as “You are special”, in addition to the bombardment of self-esteem propaganda. Popular media picked up on this trend by poking fun through the Saturday Night Live character, Stuart Smalley (“I’m good enough. I’m smart enough...”). Even the United States Army participates in this individual focus with its “Army of One” campaign, yet the Army to some level needs conformity in order to efficiently operate in war. In this effort to appease the self above all else, Twenge declares, “we have become a Lake Wobegon nation: all of our children are above average” (p. 63). Academic inflation continues to rise. In addition, this expectation that one will and should succeed above all the rest (the American Idol ‘disease’) has lead many young people to be disheartened and even depressed. She suggests in the last chapter that academic professionals need to provide more counseling by directing students to the careers and schools best for the individual specifically, instead of directing them to the ‘best’ schools and careers (whether or not those careers include college at all).

Issues of incivility also come from a lack of appropriate professional distance. GenMe coined the acronym “TMI-too much information.” In all actuality, TMI doesn’t exist with GenMe; instead every level of self-disclosure is a possibility. One colleague of mine contends that this problem is ubiquitous as he shared an e-mail from a student explaining why she couldn’t come to class, because she “puked twice this morning and went #3 (diarrhea) like three times...”

along with many other gruesome details the instructor did not need to know. The author makes some reference to the possibility that we, as managers of the classroom, have brought some of this on ourselves by presenting ourselves as only facilitators of the classroom process (rather than experts in our field) and asking students to call us by our first names (often in the hope of seeming more accessible to the student).

On a more positive note, *Generation Me* also discusses the changes in attitude: an “Equality Revolution” (p. 180). She references to the “Civil Rights movement and the general shift toward racial equality has had a striking effect on the self-esteem of black minority youth... who grew up hearing that ‘Black is Beautiful’” (p. 185). Twenge exemplifies this change in attitude in the following quote.

It’s generally the Boomers who say, “Wow, isn’t it great that Condi Rice is the first black woman to be secretary of state?” “Sure,” GenMe thinks, “it’s great, but what did you expect? She’s smart and capable, so where’s the news story?” (p. 183)

The author also reveals changes in personality as women have made strides toward more “stereotypical masculine” (p. 197) traits, such as assertiveness and a greater trend toward individualism. Men have also taken on more stereotypically feminine characteristics of nurturance, home-making, and care for physical appearance and fashion. She explores many other changes in attitude of tolerance regarding race, religion, orientation, and gender. Some would argue this has created a more positive environment for discussing diversity issues in the classroom.

After reading *Generation Me*, the instructor should have an overall understanding of GenMe. The last chapter of the book discusses possible ways of handling this generation. She suggests giving more counseling to students for a career path, create support for working parents, and even gives some suggestions for public policy (such as making “child care expenses tax-deductible”) (p. 232). The author does not hide her political leanings, so the reader may need to sift through this perceptual filter to get to the core of the generational research and suggestions. However, despite the often cynical stance of the book (cynicism is also common among GenMe, as the popularity of the sitcom “Seinfeld” will attest) the author gives hope at the end with ways for the generation to cope. GenMe’s disenchanted members (as shown in a great increase in cases of depression compared to other generations) can feel best about themselves by helping others. Today’s “young people are more willing to commit themselves to good causes for long periods” (p. 241). Twenge ends with suggesting community involvement, which correlates to our current trend in academia: service learning. Perhaps we are on the right track after all.